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ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption that teachers play a critical role in producing positive public opinions of schooling, this article provides suggestions for administrators to use to improve their schools' public relations. The first list of suggestions offers details about how to make teachers more aware of their roles as public relations agents. This 12-item list first suggests giving teachers a list of specific expectations regarding public relations. Then a list of 22 suggestions for improving home-school communications is offered, including responding thoughtfully and promptly to telephone calls, sharing information through newsletters, and communicating with straightforward messages. A 20-item list contains ways administrators can recognize good teachers and positive communicators, including developing a monthly newsletter highlighting public relations efforts of teachers, passing on compliments to faculty and staff frequently, and acknowledging appreciation to staff members with special notes of thanks. The final 14-item list tells how teachers can recognize the uniqueness of a particular child. Suggestions include utilizing "happiness notes" or "success cards" containing encouraging comments, arranging for media coverage of student events, and featuring students in the school newsletter. (JM)

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HOW TO IMPROVE TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

by

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First, teachers for the most part need to me more aware of their role as PR agents. Secondly, teachers should be given interesting suggestions for improving home-school communications as well as being encouraged to create their own ideas. Number three is that school districts ought to recognize good teachers and positive communicators. The fourth point is that the focus of this relationship lies in the uniqueness of a particular child and his or her achievements. The child is the wholesaler and, usually the interpreter for both the parent and the teacher.

Teachers play the largest and most critical role in producing public understanding of schooling. They are, of course, the mainstay laborers in the educational enterprise. Teachers translate the goals of the board and decisions of the superintendent through their daily actions. The close contact with students builds rapport and memories that have a residual effect throughout one's life. Teachers communicate with parents and guardians more frequently and in more depth than any other employee group in the system. Normal activities such as homework, school behavior and reporting student progress afford regular opportunities to foster goodwill or to convey something less appealing. What happens at school is a frequent topic of conversation at the dinner table and elsewhere. A teacher has the power to generate an hour long dialogue between a parent and child over a "well done" written at the top of an essay paper or by the simple act of wearing a new dress to school. Parents judge schools primarily in terms of their children's teachers.

Speaking strictly from the standpoint of communications theory, teachers are far and away the best communication resources available in a school district. Four established communication principles confirm this statement. Communication is enhanced, (a) by the sheer quantity and repetition of the messages - teachers give literally thousands of impressions every year, (b) by two-way face-to-face

conversations - teachers talk more with parents than the most outgoing administrator or school board member ever could, (c) by the degree of proximity of the parties about the matter under discussion - teachers are treated as part of the family or neighborhood by parents, and (d) by the personal stake the parties have in the issue - teachers communicate with parents on an intimate level.

The first step you should take if your aim is to improve teacher-parent relationships is:

I. Educate Teachers About Their Roles as PR Agents

In districts with a public information official, the assumption among the staff may be that that particular individual has the entire responsibility for public relations. After all, doesn't PR mean taking pictures, writing news releases, escorting visitors around schools, speaking before large groups and other publicity functions? In the eyes of many teachers this must be somebody else's responsibility. Administrators and school board members may feel that PR is everybody's responsibility, but neglect to clearly say who is to do what.

Mrs. Elizabeth Koontz, a former president of the National Education Association, is convinced that school public relations involves classroom teachers. She believes that teachers ought to be expected to assist and that they should be asking what they can do to help the most. Besides being good for the profession, she says that it is in a teacher's own best interest.

Gordon McCloskey, an established expert in the field of school community relations, has written that teachers are often reluctant to accept much responsiblility for public relations because they do not recognize the need. He proposes disseminating information to staff that explains in simple terms that adequate support for educational programs and the economic well being of teachers hinge upon the success of their communication efforts. In essence, McCloskey is saying that the key to communicating with parents is teachers, however, one must first communicate with teachers.

Making Teachers More Aware of Their Role as PR Agents

- All teachers hired new should be given a list of specific expectations including those involving public relations.
- Teachers currently employed should contribute to this list.
- Have teachers and others develop at least one personal goal and objective - Al Holliday, a noted PR expert, calls these PAS - personal achievement system - which is very similar to MBO.
- Establish "positive two-way communication with parents" as a school goal. Brainstorm activities with staff.
- Be sure to discuss the informal aspects of teachers communicating with parents outside of school. Rumor control is important and often hinges upon teachers living in the community.
- Encourage the concept that problems can always be solved, even when arguments cannot be won.
- Consider teachers as professionals capable of positive public relations.
- Set an example by sending birthday cards and other cards and flowers to teachers.
- Promote the slogan that reasonable people can disagree without being disagreeable.
- Hold special activities for milestone events, 20 year anniversary for a particular program, or people.
- Informally ask teachers once in awhile to tell you the good things that happened in their classrooms.
- Invite news media representatives to speak at faculty meetings.

The overall message the staff should communicate should be one of pride in where they work and those with whom they work.

II. Suggestions for Improving Home School Communications

1. Respond thoughtfully and as promptly as possible to telephone calls or other correspondence.

2. Share information about schools through newsletters, community meetings and other forums.

3. Handwritten notes work wonders, the written word is one of the key links between educators and parents.

4. Communicate with straightforward messages in language parents understand. Efforts of educators to impress laymen with "educationese" often turns parents off.

5. Parent-teacher conferences that are well planned can be informative for both teacher and parent.

6. Invite groups of parents to early morning breakfasts at your school. Find out their concerns and ask for suggestions about improving the school.

7. Extend personal courtesies (e.g., a special invitation to a school function, inquiries about a sick child).

8. Develop a volunteer program that encourages parents to take an active role in the school.

9. Invite parents and community members to visit your classroom to give presentations, etc.

10. Make home visits or attend community activities in which students are involved.

11. Develop a special parent education plan (e.g., special parent workshops on testing, study skills are most beneficial to parents).

12. Solicit parental participation for special activites in the classroom.

13. School advisory groups made up of parents serve as a good indicator of community concerns.

14. Use community resources through sponsoring the following activities: mini-PTA, toy market, summer learning packets, inviting speakers to classrooms, exhibits at shopping centers, donating lost and found items to charity, places to visit calendars, etc.

15. Other ideas: parent resource files, letters to newborns, calls to sick children, feature family of the week, grade level dinners, state of the class messages, grandparents' days, a "talk back" report card, class cookbooks, used book exchange, student/parent fashion shows, and a foreign language bank made up of students/parents for out-of-town visitors.

16. Start off the school year by sending a welcome letter to each child in August. Finish off the year with a note to each child after school is out.

17. Occasionally provide a child care center for meetings when parents will be attending who have younger children.

18. Showcase extracurricular activities and clubs outside of the school building.

19. "Think visual" - add simulated bullfights to the Spanish class lunchtime festival.

20. Student government days or visits to governmental officials are opportune occasions for media coverage.

21. Hold teacher-student switch days.

22. Arrange for high school students and junior high feeder students to exchange places for a day.

III. Recognizing Good Teachers and Positive Communicators

1. Develop a monthly newsletter to employees highlighting PR efforts of teachers.

2. Make it a point to pass on compliments to all faculty and staff, frequently. Give recognition when it is due.

3. Acknowledge appreciation to staff members with special notes of thanks.

4. Feature outstanding accomplishments of teachers in school newsletter.

5. Ask teacher's assistance in conducting a teacher in-service session on public relation techniques.

6. Encourage the PTA to sponsor a teacher appreciation breakfast or lunch.

7. Mention to PTA leaders that teachers in general and specific teachers should be recognized for their efforts.

8. Encourage local groups such as the Jaycees or Chamber of Commerce to sponsor outstanding teacher programs.

9. Request community organizations to draw upon school employees as speakers for meetings of their group.

10. Let parents know that teachers appreciate notes or calls of praise. Good teaching is often taken for granted by parents.

11. Use "special cards" (good for release of one assigned duty) to reward teachers.

12. Take a personal interest in the staff.

13. Send "Thank You" grams to teachers.

14. Make sure teachers' suggestions are followed up on and publicly considered.

15. Never discuss parental complaints about specific teachers in public.

16. Honor "Staff Members of the Week."

17. Appreciate the ordinary things.

18. Establish Excellence Reports at board meetings to recognize outstanding teachers.

19. Suggest to parents and others that they show their appreciation to teachers for extra special events through "letters-to the editor."

20. Send "newsreleases" about individual teachers totheir church or club bulletins.

IV. Teachers Should Recognize the Uniqueness of a Particular Child and His/Her Achievements

Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, two noted PR experts have stated: There is no surer route to a person's heart - or resentment - than through his or her child.

1. Utilize happiness notes or success cards encouraging comments and recognition (this helps students feel successful, success is the fuel of motivation for even greater success).

2. Arrange for media coverage of student events.

3. Feature students in school newsletter, highlighting achievements.

4. Write a note to parents, complimenting them on their child's accomplishments.

5. Develop a bulletin board display which highlights a student or students. Display pictures and short synopsis of the achievement.

6. Allow pupils to share their experiences with other students during assemblies or via closed circuit T.V. Then share this with parents.

7. "Catch children doing good" and let their parents know as well.

8. Initiate a "Star of the Day" program.

9. Start a positive calls-to-parents program in which teachers make few short telephone calls a week.

10. Have teachers periodically provide administrators with the names of students who have done something outstanding, so that the administrator might congratulate the youngsters and contact their parents.

11. Save samples of good work of a student to give to his or her parents as a holiday gift.

12. Make sure that all students are recognized for something positive during the school year.

13. Invite recent graduates back to speak to classes or parent meetings.

14. Communicate the success of secondary students to "feeder" schools.

Parents give schools two of their most important assets - their children and their money. It is no wonder that parents want us to handle these treasures with such care.